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PROGRAMME MATTERS

# Improvement of the international response to environmental emergencies

## Report of the Executive Director

## Summary

The present report is submitted in accordance with Governing Council decision 18/19 of 26 May 1995 which requested the Executive Director, inter alia, to prepare a detailed progress report on the activities of the Joint United Nations Environment Programme/Department of Humanitarian Affairs Environment Unit. During 1995-1996, the Joint Unit improved the delivery of international assistance to Governments facing environmental emergencies. It assisted many countries, particularly developing countries, using the specific mechanisms, tools and capabilities it has developed. The Joint Unit acts as a broker between affected and donor countries, by operating an information clearing-house and acting as a focal point for disaster notification and alert. The initial phase of this joint initiative has demonstrated that the integration of experience and expertise between the United Nations Environment Programme and the United Nations Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA) is a practical approach that makes the best use of limited resources. It provides a targeted and efficient structure, and fills identified gaps in the international coverage of environmental-emergency response, without duplicating the response of other organizations. Countries may now call on a practical, stand-by system, capable of a round-the-clock response, to mobilize international assistance in the case of environmental emergencies.

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## Suggested action by the Governing Council

The Governing Council may wish to:

1. Take note of the report of the Executive Director on progress in implementing decision 18/19;

2. Express its satisfaction with the continued collaboration between the United Nations Environment Programme and the United Nations Department of Humanitarian Affairs in enhancing the ability of the United Nations to respond to environmental emergencies;

3. Invite Governments and relevant United Nations organizations and specialized agencies to continue to cooperate with the Joint Unit in its efforts to provide assistance to countries, in particular developing countries, facing environmental emergencies;

4. Request the Joint United Nations Environment Programme/Department of Humanitarian Affairs Environment Unit to develop further its activities in accordance with recommendations of the Advisory Group on Environmental Emergencies;

5. Urge Governments and international organizations, in a position to do so, to contribute to the Trust Fund for Environmental Emergencies.

## INTRODUCTION

1. The Joint UNEP/DHA Environment Unit was set up in 1994, following extensive consultations with Governments. The latter expressed strong support for a simple mechanism within the United Nations to ensure prompt delivery of international assistance and offer a single entry point to the United Nations system in the case of environmental emergencies. The Joint Unit has been mandated to improve the international response to environmental emergencies by acting as a broker between affected and donor countries, a clearing-house for information and a switchboard for disaster notification and alert. This integrated United Nations response capacity of UNEP and DHA is catalysing international assistance to countries facing environmental emergencies such as chemical and oil spills, industrial accidents, forest fires and other sudden-onset emergencies that cause, or threaten, environmental damage and can have serious impacts on human health and welfare. The Joint Unit is accessible for urgent assistance 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

2. The operational costs of the Joint Unit, including staff, communications, travel and office equipment, are covered by UNEP. DHA is providing the Unit with necessary support and backstopping, including office space and emergency-response facilities. The Joint Unit is organizationally fully integrated in DHA's Relief Coordination Branch and carries out its activities in conformity with services traditionally provided by that Branch, including arrangements for independent assessment of emergencies.

3. UNEP and DHA have set up an open-ended international Advisory Group on Environmental Emergencies to bring together national experts and focal points from countries around the world. The Advisory Group meets annually to share experience in the field of response to environmental disasters, review the work of the Joint Unit, and provide advice and guidance on its future activities. The second meeting of the Advisory Group was held in October 1996. The activities and services of the Joint Unit are being developed taking fully into account the recommendations of the Advisory Group.

4. Since the Joint Unit is operating under difficult financial conditions and with minimal staff, the Russian Federation recommended the establishment of a Trust Fund for Environmental Emergencies to increase the Unit's ability to respond quickly to environmental emergencies and made an initial pledge of $10,000.

## I. ACTIVITIES AND SERVICES PROVIDED BY THE JOINT UNEP/DHA ENVIRONMENT UNIT

5. UNEP and DHA continued consolidating humanitarian and environmental assistance to countries facing environmental emergencies. To improve the delivery of environmental-emergency assistance to Governments, the Joint Unit has been further developing core-response services, including brokerage and information clearing-house functions, and the facilitation of initial assessment and post-emergency analysis. It has also implemented a number of support activities.

6. The Joint Unit has developed a global network of officially-designated National Focal Points (NFPs), which functions as a conduit for information

and assistance. Operating through this network, the unit is able to maintain efficient links between both potential recipient and donor countries, so that requests for assistance can be brokered with minimum delays. This global network has been considerably expanded and covers, at present, almost one hundred countries in all major regions.

7. An open-ended roster of environmental stand-by experts from different countries has been established. These experts are called upon for the provision of urgent professional advice and/or participation in specific field missions to assess emergency situations. A number of stand-by experts have already participated in various missions. The financial contributions and provision of expertise by some donor countries have allowed the Joint Unit to provide effective assistance and services with a very small in-house team.

8. Swift preparation and wide distribution of standard information and situation reports among relevant actors has allowed the establishment of a flow of information on disasters and their environmental consequences. To improve emergency-reporting procedures, a standard notification/request form for assistance has been prepared and disseminated, on a trial basis, among National Focal Points and UNDP Resident Representatives in all countries. The development of such a procedure for environmental emergencies is used to strengthen the links between potentially affected countries, the Joint Unit and potential donors, by facilitating the rapid flow of essential information. The form has been already used in several emergency situations. Draft guidelines and a questionnaire for environmental assessment following chemical emergencies have also been elaborated. This emergency-assessment tool aims at assisting competent national authorities and/or international experts to gather the necessary data on-site, for onwards transmission to the Joint Unit.

9. The Joint Unit has increased collaboration with other UNEP units and programmes dealing with prevention and preparedness aspects of environmental emergencies. Draft guidelines for the development of a National Environmental Contingency Plan have been prepared in cooperation with UNEP Industry and Environment Programme Activity Centre (IE/PAC). The purpose of these guidelines is to assist countries in formulating such plans at the national level. In addition, the Joint Unit, in collaboration with the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and IE/PAC, initiated the updating of the 1991 International Directory of Emergency Response Centres.

10. Since its establishment, the Joint Unit has assisted many countries in responding to a variety of environmental emergencies by using the mechanisms, tools and capabilities it developed. Among these countries are Turkey, Albania, Ecuador, Montenegro, Djibouti, Barbados, Chile, Mozambique and Romania. In 1995-1996, the Joint Unit responded to requests for assistance from, among other countries, Ukraine (major sewerage system collapse), Guyana (mining waste dam failure), the Seychelles (main sewerage system breakdown), Rwanda (fungicide storage fire), Slovenia (chemical-waste dumping-site fire), the Philippines (spill of copper mine tailings), and the Russian Federation (oil-waste fire). These responses were adapted to meet the specific situations of the country requesting assistance.

11. Practical experience in implementing this joint initiative has clearly demonstrated the appropriateness of the Joint Unit's location in Geneva, where it is fully integrated in DHA's Relief Coordination Branch in Geneva and relies on the emergency-response facilities of the Relief Coordination Branch, particularly its modern Operations Centre.

## II. REVIEW OF THE JOINT UNIT BY THE ADVISORY GROUP ON ENVIRONMENTAL EMERGENCIES

12. The second meeting of the Advisory Group on Environmental Emergencies was held in Geneva on 3-4 October 1996. It reviewed the implementation of the Joint Unit's activities, which is operating with extremely limited financial resources and with minimal staff. The Advisory Group also considered proposals for further improvement of emergency assistance to Governments in 1997-1999. The Advisory Group expressed its satisfaction with the continued collaboration between UNEP and DHA. It also expressed its satisfaction with the development of cooperation with relevant United Nations agencies and UNEP units, particularly UNEP's chemicals programme and UNEP's IE/PAC's Awareness and Preparedness for Emergencies at Local Level (APELL) programme.

13. The Advisory Group was briefed on emergency situations where the Joint Unit has assisted countries; in particular it was informed of the important United Nations expert assessment mission to the Philippines, which helped the national authorities to evaluate the consequences of a large-scale spill of mining tailings in March 1996. The Group recognized that the Joint Unit has provided valuable impartial information with regard to a number of environmental emergencies and recommended that the flow of information on environmental emergencies be further improved.

14. The Advisory Group was informed that, due to an unprecedented financial crisis, UNEP has only be able to allocate the minimum funds to keep one Professional staff member and one secretary in the Joint Unit and will not be in a position to provide financial resources for the activities of the Joint Unit in 1997. The Advisory Group fully recognized the difficult financial situation and discussed various possibilities for additional support to the Joint Unit, including cash contributions, secondment of Professional staff members, execution of specific project proposals in countries, nomination of national experts for United Nations assessment missions, and having the costs of meetings of the Advisory Group borne by different countries. The Advisory Group asked the Executive Director of UNEP to allocate the necessary resources for the biennium 1998-1999 for the administration and operation of the Joint Unit and recommended to Governments in a position to do so to provide additional resources.

15. The Advisory Group also requested the Joint Unit to develop further its activities and services, especially brokerage, clearing-house and assessment, in conformity with standard operational procedures of DHA's Relief Coordination Branch.

16. Since the major elements of the response system established by the Joint Unit require permanent maintenance and further improvement, the Joint Unit will strive to consolidate and strengthen the international capacity to

respond to environmental emergencies. It will also continue to focus on assistance to countries facing environmental emergencies, taking fully into account recommendations of the Advisory Group on Environmental Emergencies.

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